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Silence as a multi-purpose speech act in Turkish political discourse

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Abstract

Silence sometimes means more than words. Doubtless to say, it carries various meanings depending on the topic, participants, setting and culture in communication. This study attempts to explore pragmatic functions of silence specific to Turkish political discourse. Drawing on from Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory, *ad hoc* assumptions of illocutionary force of silence at informative and communicative levels of intention in intra turn pauses are scrutinized and corresponded speech acts are evaluated. Limited to our data, the analysis revealed that the politicians in the debate preferred few intra turn pauses, which validates the view that they are articulate and open in political communication. Where silence was observed, it was found out that it was employed to realize certain hidden speech acts to enable the flow of the conversation. Context dependent interpretations of pauses corresponded to the acts of approving, seeking for approval, accusing, challenging and refusing to speak/answer.

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1. Introduction

Where words do not come easily or when the speakers intentionally remain silent, silence may have myriad meanings to the listeners – ranging from acceptance to disapproval or scorn. The range of the interpretations may vary from one culture to another as it is subjective and relative, which indicates silence is both context specific and culture specific (Jaworski, 1993). In the eastern cultures, silence is particularly appreciated and associated with several positive impressions in communication, while in the western culture, silence is usually avoided as it is regarded as a kind of social weakness or a sign of withholding and un-cooperative personality (Tannen, 1985) or a manifest of the speaker's lack of knowledge (Irvine, 1978, cited in Weiner et al., 2003: 29).

Silence can be defined as “the absence of talk” which contains certain communicative purposes (Sifianou, 1997: 63; Agyekum, 2002:1). Bonvillain (1993:47 as cited in Agyekum, 2002) describes silence as “an act of non-verbal communication that transmits many kinds of meaning, depending on cultural norms of interpretation.” Ephratt (2008: 1911) contends that silence must bear a communicative function, sometimes peculiar to the interlocutors and sometimes to the context and culture where it appears. Silence has been reported to have illocutionary force to perform a speech act that seems to exist universally, naturally displaying cultural variance (Sifianou, 1997, Agyekum, 2002, Nakane, 2007, Ephratt 2008). Sifianou (1997) mentions two primary types of silence. First one is the pauses and hesitations encountered during the verbal turns to take some time to think. Second one is the longer

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silences generally used intentionally, which bear certain meanings and illocutionary force, which is “eloquent silence” (Sifianou, 1997:65, Ephratt, 2008: 1909-1910). Agyekum (2002) also focused on this eloquent silence and investigated it in Akan society with a socio-pragmatic approach which puts forward that silence embodies social and rhetorical influence, conveys meaning and therefore, has communicative functions. Kurzon (1998) differentiating between intentional and unintentional silence, states that intentional silence conveys meaning in communication.

There has been a good deal of research on functions and meanings of silence from different perspectives in intercultural communication. Nakane (2005 pp. 11-12) summarizes the functions of silence under the headings of cognitive, discursive, social, and affective functions. In cognitive perspective, the lengths of pauses and hesitations in speech are taken as the time needed for processing language before speaking or listening. The prosodic features of speech call for the use of pauses as the tools marking utterance boundaries in discourse. Considering interpersonal functions based on persona, social distance and relative social status (Halliday, 1994) silence is said to govern or organize social relations. From the politeness theory viewpoint, silence is seen as a strategy to avoid face threats and the most polite speech act, especially in the East. For example, disagreement and rejection are commonly mentioned speech acts performed through silence in Japanese culture, as an “off record politeness strategy”. Refusals and rejections are made with a silence for fear that they may damage the speakers’ face when baldly realized (Nakane, 2007). In some African societies, silence appears as a manifestation of power, however, whether the mighty or the weak remains silent changes in different societies. Sometimes the powerful is silent to show he is the superior. Sometimes the suppressed keeps his silence in submission. In the same vein, as a tool for social control, silence in some societies is a way to punish the enraged or those who committed violence. (Agyekum, 2002). Similarly, the way silence is used in speech characterizes conversational styles through pause length, speed and frequency of talk as is reported in Tannen’s study (1985, cited in Jaworski, 1993), where she found out New Yorkers have different orientations in silence and perceive slow speakers (Californians) as “withholding and uncooperative”. Baker (1955 cited in Jaworski, 1993) mentions two types of silence in politics; one occurs when the speech breaks down; the other, when there is a failure to utter relevant words. Baker sees the latter as a political strategy “przemilczenie” (failing to mention something). Agyekum (2002: 33) labels this kind of silence as communicative silence in Akan culture, realized with the utterances like “I will not utter a word or I have no response or explanation to this”. Such an attitude is referred to as “absence of relevant talk” by Jaworsky and Sachdev (1998 p.274), all of which overlap with what Sperber and Wilson (1986) propose as a situation of “irrelevance” where the most ostensive stimulus is not recognized in communication. Within the perspective of the Relevance theory, it is necessary to analyse the assumptions based on silence as part of non verbal communication at two levels of intentionality: informative intention produced to indicate a set of assumptions to the listener; and communicative intention, a mutual understanding and recognition of the speaker’s informative intention. In other words, when the speaker’s intended meaning loaded to silence is transmitted to the hearer and recognized by him, communication is said to be achieved.

Relevance theory is based on a definition of relevance and two principles of relevance. With “relevance” it is meant whatever allows the *most new information* to be transmitted in that context on the basis of the *least amount of effort* required to convey it (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995). In finding the most relevant in a given environment, the speakers make use of inferences, implicatures and disambiguations that bind them to the theme of the conversation and make them keep on their communication. Two principles of relevance are given as “a Cognitive Principle” which presumes that the hearers are cognitively ready to grasp the maximum relevance and a “Communicative Principle” which asserts that utterances create expectations of optimal relevance. Hence, basic components of the theory contain implicit inferences and implicatures out of the contexts of utterances. The hearer chooses the best interpretation of the utterances which fits into his expectations using ostensive clues that lead to interpretation. In sum, Relevance theory attempts to explicate pragmatic value of several linguistic items beyond their literal or referential meanings as they relate to particular contexts. Sperber and Wilson (ibid.) contend that the truth of linguistic items may have temporary or *ad hoc* meanings that are shaped by the contexts they are used in. In the analysis of silence, it seems that Relevance Theory is the most appropriate perspective as silence functions as *an ad hoc non-linguistic concept* that may have different interpretations in various situational contexts.

At this standpoint, in an attempt to contribute to the range of functions attached to the use of silence in various contexts in different cultures, this study aims to delve into the pragmatic motivations, specifically speech acts behind the use of silence in Turkish political talk shows in line with Relevance theory. Considering all above, we, in this study, aimed to uncover the following research questions:

- How is silence used in political discourse?
- What are the *ad hoc* assumptions of silence in the form of speech acts in political discourse?

2. Methodology

In this study, an interpretation of silence is attempted in conversational turns in a Turkish political talk show taking a relevance theoretic perspective proposed by Sperber and Wilson (*ibid.*). In the political discussion context under focus in this study, the use and probable functions of the silence are explored. The data for the study were gathered from the archive recordings of the program “Political Arena” on a TV channel. A 190-minute episode in which the discussion only goes around topics regarding politics was chosen (i.e. the episode shot on April 1st, 2010). A screen timer is used to calculate the duration of the pauses. In this program, the guests are the former party leader of CHP (Republican People Party, the main opposing party), and four journalists from different newspapers. The nature of this program is that the host of the program leads the discussion with his questions; there is a main speaker and other guests to ask questions to this main speaker. In the episode we chose, the discussion topics were constitutional amendment proposal of AKP (Justice and Development Party, the ruling party), the actions and mistakes of the government, and criticism about the opposing style of CHP.

At first, all the pauses occurring during both dialogues (speaker to host of the program and speaker to the other guests) and monologues were identified. At the second stage, based on the context and the reaction of the audience (the other guests), It was found out that some of the pauses were loaded with illocutionary force. We, later, agreed on the functions of pauses, referring to probable speech acts. The dialogues were transcribed and the use of silence is tackled with.

Considering the classification of the forms of silence by Nakane (2007 p: 7), in the analysis, only “intra-turn pauses” are taken into account. “Intra turn pauses” are defined as a form of silence which the speakers use when they take the floor to answer the questions. Therefore, other forms of silence like inter-turn pauses and the speakers’ turn constituting silences with illocutionary force were disregarded. In addition, temporary silence of individuals who do not hold the floor in interaction, total withdrawal of speech in a speech event, silence of a group participants as a constituent of social/religious events, discourse suppressed by a dominant force at various levels of social organization were not applicable to the political setting under investigation. For the ease of the research, we took “silence” as intra-turn pauses with illocutionary force, intra-turn pauses with illocutionary force in which the audience is verbally responsive and intentional topic switches with explicit statements expressing that the speaker will be silent in the given topic and will talk about an irrelevant topic or a subtopic.

3. Results

3.1. *The use of Silence in Political Talk*

The findings with respect to the use of silence revealed that the politicians in the debate preferred few intra turn pauses. Where pauses were observed, it was found out that it was employed to realize certain speech acts that enable the flow of the conversation, as below.

3.2. *Ad hoc assumptions of silence in the form of speech acts*

3.2.1. *Intra-turn pauses with illocutionary force*

Intra-turn pauses tend to serve the functions of approving (*Sample dialogue 1*), seeking for approval (*Sample dialogue 2*), accusing (*Sample dialogue 3*), challenging (*Sample dialogue 4*) and refusing to speak/answer (*Sample dialogue 5*).

Sample dialogue 1: While the guest speakers are discussing over the constitutional amendment proposal of the ruling party, the host of the program asks a question to the former party leader of CHP about whether he defends his claim on the lawlessness of the ruling party in the process of gathering the signatures for this proposal.

D. B.: “(0.3 seconds). This is an obvious fact that among the signatures in the constitutional amendment proposal of AKP presented to the speakership of the parliament is the signature of the president of the assembly. This is an unquestionable fact. ...”

The former party leader of CHP pauses for 3 seconds. It is understood that he approves that he actually defends his claim as the subsequent utterances prove. The informative intention of the silence is not clear until the speaker states a fact that supports his claim. The communicative intention is fulfilled anyway with the help of the statements followed after the silence.

Sample dialogue 2: While talking about the lawlessness of the signatures collected for the constitutional amendment proposal of the ruling party, the former party leader of CHP remains silent for 4 seconds by staring at the journalists. With his facial expression, he obviously seeks for the support or approval of the audience.

D.B.: “There are some other interesting differences apart from the signature of the president of the assembly between the list of signature given to the president of the assembly at the first place and the other the other list of signatures given later part from the signature of the president of the assembly. I mean, for example, a person who was available in the first list and who declared to the public opinion that they are against the proposal are not available in the second list (0.4 seconds). I mean, it has been seen that this first list of signature was taken from another ready list of signatures that were taken for another purpose.”

The communicative function of the silence in above example is to get support from the audience. In fact, the subsequent utterance is a reflection of the speaker's intention that the speaker desires to be approved by the audience for his claim. Consequently, the speaker shows the informative intention of the silence indicating that he knows the government has done illegal actions in need of support. However, none of the listeners display any verbal or non-verbal clues indicating that they support the speaker. Therefore, the communicative intention is not fulfilled.

3.2.2. Intra-turn pauses with illocutionary force in which the audience is verbally responsive.

Verbal responses of the audience usually help interpret the function of the pauses between both the speakers and the hearers. The involvement of the audience, in other words, paves the way for the realization of the communicative intention. In the dialogue below, 'D.B.' claims that some people transferred the documents to the office of the chief prosecutor to close down Refah Party and remains silent for 3 seconds by staring at the audience allusively and after having finished his statements. The silence in this utterance has a communicative function of accusing some people implicitly by not giving any names. This silence is also interpreted as a hint by the audience as they ask 'Who?' in return. Moreover, they explicitly utter that the silence is a hint for accusing somebody. Thus, it is seen that the informative intention of the silence is made manifest to the audience and communicative intention is achieved.

Sample dialogue 3: While the guests were talking about the criticisms on the opposing style of CHP, the former leader of CHP utters the following statements:

D. B.:It is impossible that Turkey doesn't have any alternatives. CHP is another topic. The place where we stand is another place. I mean, Saadet Party, say, Refah Party was closed down. Afterwards, to close down Refah Party, somebody transferred some documents to the office of the chief prosecutor (0.3). Just to close it down (0.3).

The journalist: Who?

Other journalist: There is a hint here.

A. K.: Who?

D. B.: Refah Party was closed down.

Sample dialogue 4: While the journalists are criticizing the opposing style of CHP and asking questions to the former party leader of CHP, a 4-second silence of the speaker functions as a speech act of challenge. It may be interpreted as 'if you dare to replace us and think you will achieve more success, here is the battle field.' However, the speaker also indirectly expresses that he doesn't believe there is such a person or party around. This is an example of a situation where both informative and communicative intention of the silence are fulfilled. A pause of 0,4 seconds becomes informative and implies the existence of a rival on the part of the speakers. One of the listeners, the host of the program deciphers the implicature, considering probable politicians, which fulfills the communicative intention of the silence.

D. B: I respect anybody who finds CHP's attempts incorrect. But then they have a responsibility to be more successful (0.4). We all respect whoever comes up with the claim to replace CHP.

A. K.: Can Mustafa Sarıgül do this?

D. B. I: Now (laughs). About this...

Ali Kırca: I mean, while approaching to the end of the program, I want to cut cross to talk about certain topics; that's why.

D.B.: I got it. I got it.

3.2.3. *Intentional topic switches and state of unwillingness to speak/answer, with explicit expressions.*

In our data, almost none of the questions are met with merely long silences; instead, after 3 or 4-second silence, they either change the topic or explicitly avert the flow of the speech to a related subtopic, which can be taken as “the absence of relevant speech” or “*przemilczenie*” (failing to mention something) in Baker’s terms (ibid.) a strategy of remaining purposively silent in the given topic, as evident in Dialogue 5 and 6. In both, the speakers make their informative intention clear to the listeners and they in return recognize this informative intention that they do not want to talk about the topic; the communicative intention was thus successfully fulfilled.

Sample dialogue 5: One of the journalists criticizes CHP for having a cruel and hostile opposing style. Therefore, the former leader of CHP defends himself with the statement “*I don’t want to rake this up; I don’t want to talk about these issues*”

Journalist: What did they do then you came to this conclusion?

Deniz Baykal: Have a look at the following events. Isn’t there something behind this? I don’t want to rake this up; I don’t want to talk about these issues. But we can’t say this is meaningless or it doesn’t count.

Sample dialogue 6: Similar strategy and function can be seen in the following dialogue as well. The speaker states that he will be silent about this very topic, but at the same time tries to lead the discussion to another direction by intentionally switching the topic.

The journalist: Didn’t we go over the limit when closing the parties, sir?

D. B.: That’s another story. I’m not talking about the past. We’ll talk about it later.

4. Conclusion

In this study, drawing on from Sperber and Wilson’s (ibid.) Relevance Theory, *ad hoc* assumptions of illocutionary force of silence at informative and communicative levels of intention in intra turn pauses are scrutinized and corresponding speech acts are evaluated. Limited to our data, the analysis revealed the politicians in the debate preferred few intra turn pauses, which validates the view that they are articulate and open in political communication. Most pauses, except for one (*Sample dialogue 2*) are seen to be mutually perceived, therefore aided for communication, performing both informative and the communicative intention. The most frequent type of silence, intentional topic switches in our data deserves a comment because it is uncontroversial to take them as “*przemilczenie*” (failing to mention something), a political strategy in Baker’s words (1955 cited in Jaworski, 1993). Besides, it is seen that intra turn pauses carry illocutionary forces of approving, seeking for approval, refusing to speak, challenging, and accusing, which consolidates the universal view that silence in communication has a meaning and function (Sifianou, 1997, Agyekum, 2002, Nakane, 2007, Ephratt 2008). These results are valuable in that they might give an idea of what the pragmatic functions of silence are in Turkish political arguments, pinpointing the fact that this preliminary study needs to be supported with the studies of other types of silence using broader data.

Most importantly, even with limited data, we believe that our study provides some contrary evidence for the cliché of “articulate west and silent east” (Nakane, 2005 p. 203) if we take Turkish society as a part of Eastern culture. The fact that the politicians usually refrain from ‘pauses’ here, as a form of silence indicates they are articulate and want to avoid silence, a weaker way of communication that might cause ambiguity and misconceptions in discussing politics. Unlike Agyekum’s (2002) argument that silence may be a face-saving strategy, in our study, politicians mostly refrained from silence probably because silence is perceived to be a face threatening act. Since silence of any form can be an indication of passiveness, powerlessness or lack of knowledge, if they remain silent, it is thought that this might damage their own personal face, therefore, silence is avoided. Whenever possible, the speakers struggle to respond verbally to what is questioned or claimed. Therefore, it might be asserted that Turkish politicians in our data tend to adopt a conversational style with limited use of silence because silence might be seen as powerlessness and lack of knowledge, as a part of negative impression attached to

she found out New Yorkers have different orientations in silence and perceive slow speakers as “withholding and uncooperative“. Our results indicate the same orientation in silence in political spoken discourse; not because little tolerance is shown to silence, but because it is political and competitive arena, where speech is a sign of power.

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